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# **GEORGIA STATE RAIL PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



Intermodal Division

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) has developed this *State Rail Plan* for the purpose of guiding the state's rail freight and passenger transportation planning activities and project development plans over the next 25 years (year 2040).

This *Plan* describes the state's existing rail network and rail-related economic and socio-economic impacts. It also describes the *State Rail Plan* process, Georgia's Rail Vision and supporting Goals, proposed short- and long-range capital improvements, studies, and recommended next steps to address the issues identified.

This *Plan* is intended to meet the requirements established by the federal Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 (PRIIA) to qualify for future federal funding for rail projects. The *Plan* is compliant with the *State Rail Plan Guidance* as specified by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) in September 2013.

## Georgia's Rail System

Georgia's rail system plays an essential role in linking Georgia shippers with markets throughout North America and the world. Chief among high volume rail shippers in the state is the coal burning industry. Historically, Atlanta has been a major nexus for rail traffic traveling on Class I or large railroads between Gulf ports and northeast, as well as between Florida and the Midwest. Georgia's short line or small railroads extend freight rail service into all areas of the state. Although Amtrak's intercity passenger services in the state are limited, Amtrak provides essential transportation services for Georgians.

### Freight Rail System

The Georgia freight rail system is operated by two Class I railroads and 29 Class III railroads (short line railroads, smaller local, switching, and terminal railroads). The system consists of 4,649 route miles, excluding leases and trackage rights.

The majority of rail mileage in the state is owned by the Class I carriers: CSXT Transportation (CSXT) and Norfolk Southern Railway (NS). These railroads own a total of 3,631 route miles. Short line railroads and the State of Georgia own the remaining 1,018 route miles in the state.

Georgia's freight railroads carried over 189 million tons of freight or more than 3.9 million rail cars of various commodities which originated or terminated within Georgia, or traveled through the state in 2011. The leading commodities, comprising almost 64% of rail borne tons, are: *Coal* (58.9 million

tons); *Chemicals and Allied Products* (19.5 million tons); *Miscellaneous Mixed Shipments* (16.4 million tons); *Food or Kindred Products* (13.9 million tons); and *Farm Products* (12.2 million tons).

Total rail freight flows in the state are forecast to increase through 2040 at a compound annual growth rate of 0.5%. The projected growth rate is impacted by an anticipated downturn in coal shipments.

### Passenger Rail Service

The state is served by four long-distance Amtrak trains. There currently is no commuter or intercity corridor service provided in the state, either by Amtrak or by other operators. There are four tourist or heritage railroads offering excursion trips.

Amtrak operates entirely over the trackage of Class I freight railroads. Amtrak's frequency of train service through Georgia is now what it was 10 years ago. While the limited availability of passenger cars has constrained traffic growth, revenue management, targeted marketing and occasional high gas prices have driven ridership increases through 2012, though 2013 saw a decline due to weather related issues and NS and CSXT track work.

The four long-distance trains are: the *Crescent*, operating between New York and New Orleans; the *Silver Meteor* and the *Silver Star*, operating between New York and Miami; and the *Palmetto*, operating between New York and Savannah. A total of 192,000 passengers boarded and alighted at the five Georgia Amtrak stations in 2013. Of these, 99,000 boardings and alightings were at the Atlanta Peachtree Street Station.

Boarding and alightings at Amtrak stations in Georgia are projected to rise to 327,000 in 2040, a 70% increase over the 27-year period. The growth equates to a 2% annual increase for the period.

### Rail Impacts

Rail service is essential to Georgia's economy. The basic provision of rail service, freight and passenger, generates a modest 6,080 direct jobs. However, when the rail freight shipper and rail passenger visitor user impact activities and multiplier impacts are included, rail-related employment in Georgia totals 672,630 jobs, which represent 12.9% of the 5.2 million jobs statewide. The jobs resulted in \$32.2 billion earned by these total impacted employees, representing 12% of Georgia's total labor income. A combined value-added impact of \$54.1 billion associated with rail services and users represent 12.4% of the state's Gross State Product (GSP).

In addition to the direct employment benefits, the availability of rail transport provides cost and logistical advantages to Georgia firms that enable the state to compete effectively in the global marketplace. The presence of rail freight is especially important in rural areas where manufacturing, agriculture, and local industries rely on freight shipping.

Railroads are also up to three times more fuel efficient than trucks on the basis of ton-miles transported, and as greenhouse gas emissions are directly related to fuel consumption, every ton-mile of freight moved by rail instead of truck reduces environmental damages and costs by 84%. The diversion of freight traffic to rail also increases the safety of state's highway system.

Amtrak intercity passenger rail service connects major urban areas, which is important to supplement air service in the state. Passenger train travelers generate income not only for the rail operations, but also for restaurants, hotels, and other visitor service establishments. Furthermore, passenger stations have the potential to increase economic development around the station areas.

## Rail Plan Development Process

This *State Rail Plan* was developed under the authority and guidance of GDOT's Intermodal Division. With regards to this *State Rail Plan*, GDOT is the designated rail authority in Georgia. The Intermodal Section is responsible for rail planning in the state and also assists short line freight railroads in obtaining funds for improvement projects. The Intermodal Division coordinated closely with other GDOT divisions responsible for various rail-related functions, including highway-rail at-grade crossing improvements, in the development of the Plan.

To provide a medium for public review, the *Draft State Rail Plan* was posted to the GDOT website (<http://www.dot.ga.gov/travelingingeorgia/rail/Pages/StateRailPlan.aspx>) prior to finalization of the *Plan*. The *State Rail Plan* is intended to integrate with and expand upon past Georgia transportation plans including Georgia's *Statewide Strategic Transportation Plan* of 2013.

All railroads operating in the state were contacted to solicit information as to their operations, projects or other needs, and their opinions as to what the public sector could do to assist or improve the efficiency and expansion of rail in the state. Similar interviews were conducted for shippers located on both the Class I and short line railroad network within the state.

In April 2014, GDOT publicized in notices and at its public outreach meetings the availability of a *State Rail Plan* webpage. Within the webpage rail stakeholders and the general public were invited to respond to a survey which measured their interest in improved rail commuter and intercity passenger service, and freight service within the state. Participants were also invited to express their opinions as to the proposed Rail Vision and Goals, their level of support and prospective sources for increased public rail financial investment, and both general and specific proposed improvements to the rail system.

Two rounds of public outreach meetings were held at Dalton, Atlanta and Valdosta to educate stakeholders and the general public regarding the *State Rail Plan* process, obtain input for developing a rail vision, and to provide a forum for discussion of specific rail issues. A total of 67 people attended the April 2014 public meetings, and another 48 people attended the August public meetings. Participants included county and local government officials; representatives of the Georgia Legislature; Metropolitan Planning Organization staff; local economic development organizations; short line railroads; rail contractors; rail labor; rail passenger advocacy organizations; rail-served industries; environmental and environmental justice groups; local media; and private citizens.

In May 2014, a special Rail Stakeholder Workshop was held in Atlanta to discuss the draft Rail Vision and Goals, along with issues, strategies and potential projects to be considered in the development of the *State Rail Plan*. A total of 40 stakeholder invitees attended the workshop. These included representatives of Georgia state agencies and authorities, an adjoining state Department of

Transportation (Alabama), Metropolitan Planning Organizations, various regional and county economic development organizations, academics, environmental advocacy groups, and rail advocacy groups.

A special outreach effort was made to minority and low income communities, also known as Environmental Justice (EJ) communities, which are often negatively and disproportionately impacted by rail infrastructure investments. Leaders of EJ communities were contacted by telephone for their views on rail service in the state and ways it could be improved to the benefit of their communities.

Lastly, the *Draft State Rail Plan* was provided to the state rail planning contacts of neighboring state departments of transportation to ensure coordination with neighboring states with respect to rail facilities, services, and future plans which cross state boundaries.

Throughout the Plan's development, a *State Rail Plan Steering Committee* provided input and guidance. The Steering Committee met four times during 2014 – in March, to review the proposed approach for *Plan* development; in May, to hear the feedback on the first round of public meetings; August, to hear the feedback on the second round of public meetings, along with a first cut at recommended GDOT sponsored rail projects and policy changes; and November, to review the *Draft State Rail Plan*. The participating Steering Committee members included representatives from the Class I railroads, the Georgia Railroad Association, the Georgia Ports Authority, Georgians for Passenger Rail, Amtrak, Georgia Municipal Association, the Federal Highway Administration, the Georgia Center of Innovation for Logistics, and GDOT staff.

## Key Stakeholder Input on Rail Issues, Challenges and Opportunities

Various themes were raised during the outreach process regarding existing rail issues at the local, regional or state levels and the direction or actions that should be taken in the future. The themes described include:

- **General rail benefits, opportunities and threats** – The importance of rail transportation is well understood, both for its impact on economic development and personal mobility. However, the intercity rail network was seen as lacking in scale, and the development of a commuter rail network in Atlanta was deemed important for economic development.
- **Rail freight** – Specific rail service problems identified by shippers, while increased rail access and service to existing and prospective new businesses and industries within the state was emphasized. Short line railroads noted the need for upgrading track and structures to handle increase loaded car weights. NS and CSXT confirm that Atlanta, and in particular Howell Junction, is a capacity constraint which to varying degrees impacts their lines through to handle increasing volumes.
- **Intercity rail service** – Stakeholders expressed a significant level of interest in intercity rail passenger service. They also indicated that existing passenger services were unreliable and could not provide the level of transportation needed. Stakeholder priorities for improved intercity rail passenger service include expansion of service to the state's employment centers and to east Georgia.
- **Commuter rail service** – The outreach effort found significant support for establishing rail commuter service in the Atlanta region. Stakeholders saw rail commuter service as a means to

meet the lack of modal options in urban areas, provide transportation hubs as catalysts for economic development and jobs, and to address Environmental Justice needs.

- **Rail safety and security** – Rail safety and security issues discussed during the stakeholder outreach process centered on at-grade crossing safety, rail trespass, the movement of hazardous materials, and the general condition of rail lines and stations.
- **Rail-related economic development** – Discussion regarding the linkage between the state’s rail network and economic development centered largely on the need to improve intercity and commuter rail passenger and freight services for community development and increased jobs.
- **Rail-related energy and environmental issues** – Rail transportation was generally portrayed as more energy efficient and environmentally friendly than other modes during the stakeholder outreach process. Participants noted that diversion from highway to rail could enhance energy conservation and the environment.
- **Rail-related Environmental Justice issues** – The stated concerns regarding current rail operations within EJ communities were primarily related to environmental factors such as noise, emissions and related health concerns, communities divided by rail operations, and the perception that the communities do not benefit from rail operations.
- **Rail financing** – The results of GDOT’s public survey found a high level of support for the development of a public policy to invest in rail infrastructure and to identify a reliable source of funding for increased rail-related public funding. Specific program areas recommended for public financing included increased maintenance of rail rights-of-way and track and bridge structures, especially for short line railroads; the elimination of grade crossings; construction or expansion of intermodal facilities; and new and improved rail passenger services.
- **The role of public agencies regarding rail** – The general sentiment from the public outreach effort was that GDOT should implement policies to make rail passenger service a priority, preserve existing rail facilities at a statewide level, support and facilitate the movement toward containerization, and educate the public as to the value of addressing rail passenger and freight needs.



## Georgia's Rail Vision, Goals and Initiatives

Based on suggestions obtained through the outreach effort, GDOT developed the following Vision statement for rail transportation.

### Georgia's Rail Vision

*"A safe and energy efficient state rail system that enables the economic wellbeing of Georgians by expanding access and enhancing mobility for people and goods in an environmentally sustainable manner."*

Rail service Goals aligned with the Rail Vision were developed based on the rail-related benefits, issues and obstacles that had been identified. These Goals are as follows:

- **Enhance safety and security** – Typical initiatives could include minimizing grade crossing accidents, hazmat spills, theft from trains and rail facilities, and upgrading deficient rail infrastructure.
- **Provide for a reliable, enhanced and interconnected passenger rail system** – Typical initiatives could include improvements to on-time performance and reliability for existing services, ADA compliance at rail stations, and expansion of intercity and commuter passenger services.
- **Promote and expand intermodal connectivity** – Typical initiatives could include new or improved freight intermodal facilities and highway connectors and better linkages between intercity and urban mass transit passenger services with improved access for pedestrians and cyclists.
- **Develop an energy efficient and environmentally sustainable rail system** – Typical initiatives could include the retrofitting to lower emission diesel electric locomotives and implementing strategies and policies to encourage the diversion of passengers and freight highways to rail.
- **Preserve and improve the existing infrastructure** – Typical initiatives could include projects to accommodate the higher maximum loaded car weights on Georgia short lines (i.e., 286,000 pounds) and upgrading track and bridges to improve operating efficiency and main line capacity, and improved access to rail users through new sidings and additional car storage capacity.
- **Enhance economic development and competitiveness** – Typical initiatives could entail promoting new rail-served development to attract new rail-oriented industries and the implementation of industrial access funding aimed at lowering transportation costs for rail shippers.

## Proposed Capital Investment Programs and Future Studies

Based on identified needs and available funding sources, short- and long-range proposed rail investment programs were developed. The short-range projects are limited to those for which funding is available or expected to be available during the four-year short-range period (2015 to 2018). Long-range projects implemented between 5 and 25 years from today, (2019 to 2040) were proposed during the outreach process or from other sources and will be further evaluated as to their feasibility, their merit on the basis of public benefits versus costs, and available funding. The projects and studies recommended appear in the table below.

The program of projects represents both investments for freight and passenger rail. Freight rail investments emphasize improvements in rail line capacity and infrastructure to ensure system fluidity and competitive access for rail shippers. Passenger rail investments emphasize new intercity and commuter rail services to enhance mobility for Georgians in all regions of the state. The investments support the State Rail Vision and Goals articulated above.

Short line projects included on the short-range program are limited to state-owned lines. Long-range short line projects include projects on both state and privately owned properties.

### Rail Service Investment Program of Projects

Short-Range Projects and Studies (Years 1-4)	Cost in Millions
ADA compliance and state of good repair improvements at Amtrak stations (5)	11.7
Atlanta commuter rail plan update	1.5
Downtown Atlanta passenger station	0.5
Analysis of alternative locations for relocation of existing Atlanta Amtrak station	0.5
Studies of new intercity service from Atlanta to Charlotte, Chattanooga, Macon and Columbus	43.6
Pilot shuttle bus between Macon and Atlanta tied to Amtrak <i>Crescent</i>	1.0
GDOT owned short line track and structure improvements	37.8
Atlanta region rail capacity study	2.0
Short line economic impact analysis	1.0
GDOT owned short line infrastructure inventory and needs analysis	1.0
Grade crossing safety improvement projects	36.0
<b>Short-range Total</b>	<b>\$136.6</b>

Long-Range Projects and Studies (Years 5-25)	Cost in Millions
Atlanta Multi-Modal Passenger Terminal engineering and design	50.0
Atlanta commuter rail engineering and design	50.0
Engineering and design for new services from Atlanta to Charlotte, Chattanooga and Columbus	150.0
New Atlanta Amtrak station	35.0
Atlanta region rail capacity solution engineering and design	5.0
Specifically identified short line infrastructure projects	218.1
Ongoing maintenance of GDOT owned short line railroads (lump sum)	877.8
Crossing safety improvement program (lump sum)	189.0
Intercity passenger rail network vision*	NA
<b>Long-range Total</b>	<b>\$1,574.9</b>

<b>Rail Program Total</b>	<b>\$1,711.5</b>
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\*Costs to be determined during future, corridor specific studies



## State Rail Plan Policy Recommendations

Based on suggestions received from stakeholders and the public during the preparation of the *State Rail Plan*, GDOT could consider the following policy initiatives:

- Continue to promote and enhance rail safety through continued safety education programs, and enhancements to the public grade crossing improvement program.
- Expand rail-related data collection efforts including data on hazardous material movements, grade crossing hazards, rail volume and commodity flows, and rail originating/terminating data.
- Develop a rail passenger marketing and education program to promote the benefits of existing rail passenger services. Post intercity passenger rail and tourist rail information and schedules on the GDOT website.
- Continue efforts to preserve strategic rail rights-of-way and support the development of rail spur, rail storage capacity, intermodal facilities, and other infrastructure projects required to maintain a state of good repair and enhance economic development through support for the establishment of a dedicated, discretionary public rail assistance program.
- Further collaborate with neighboring states on regional issues and solutions to freight and passenger rail needs through regional multi-state organizations such as the Southern Rail Commission.
- Preserve, protect, improve and expand, as necessary, intercity rail passenger service through station facility and access improvements; and continue to study of additional intercity passenger services where transportation and other public benefits merit.
- Develop a commuter rail plan emphasizing an incremental approach and coordination with Amtrak and MARTA services.
- Increase the movement of goods by rail and emphasize rail-related intermodal and other rail improvements to ensure a diverse and robust rail network, while maintaining community and environmental stewardship and economic competitiveness.

## Summary

Georgia has undertaken a comprehensive study of its passenger and freight rail network and has identified key issues and opportunities through a wide-ranging rail stakeholder and public outreach process in conjunction with various technical analyses. This *State Rail Plan* serves to document this information and set a direction for rail planning and project development into the future while meeting the federal requirements to qualify the state for any future federal rail funding.

The document is organized as follows:

- **Chapter 1** discusses the role of rail in Georgia’s multimodal transportation system and how the state is organized to provide political, legal and financial support to rail development.
- **Chapter 2** discusses the existing rail system, trends and forecasts of freight and passenger rail traffic, and needs and opportunities facing Georgia’s railroads and rail stakeholders.
- **Chapter 3** identifies various passenger rail projects and improvements that have been investigated or are under study.
- **Chapter 4** notes the specific rail improvements planned by Class I railroads (CSXT and NS), the needs of the state’s short line railroads, and the state’s grade crossing improvement program.
- **Chapter 5** outlines a proposed program of short-range and long-range rail improvements and studies.
- **Chapter 6** describes the stakeholder and public outreach process conducted in support of the *Georgia State Rail Plan*.

The development of this *Plan* would not have been possible without the participation of many rail stakeholders and others, and the Georgia Department of Transportation expresses its appreciation to those individuals and parties who participated in this effort.